

Book Review: The Post-9/11 Video Game: A Critical Examination

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In light of the current political turmoil in the United States, one could easily forget about that other cataclysmic event that shook up American society in the early 21st century: the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In their latest book, Marc Ouellette and Jason Thompson take us back to 9/11, by looking at how the event transformed American culture, and the US video game industry in particular. They focus on the genre of the war-game, since 9/11, according to the authors, fundamentally changed how these games are made and what cultural values they represent. In what follows, Ouellette and Thompson try to dissect the post-9/11 war-themed video game “through the dual lenses of cultural studies and rhetoric, as a discursive form” (p. 2), but unfortunately, they fail in this endeavor in a number of significant ways.

The central premise of the book is rather straightforward: 9/11 didn’t as much change the American game industry directly, but it turned the war-games that are produced by it into allegorical and pedagogical battlegrounds for the ‘War on Terror’, while it also infused them with re-imagined notions of themes like ‘the city’, ‘the marketplace’, ‘death’, ‘brotherhood’, ‘masculinity’, and its relationship to technology. Throughout the book, the authors expand on this observation, by providing several examples of the allegorical and pedagogical function of the post-9/11 war-game, followed by an in-depth exploration of each of the aforementioned themes.

In the analyses that follow however, several problems come to the fore. As becomes clear throughout the book rather quickly, the authors mostly provide a set of, sometimes thought-provoking, personal interpretations of a select number of games, but these are then generalized too easily, in most cases without offering clear references to the method that was used or the sources that were consulted to do so. In the introductory chapter for example, on the allegorical nature of the spy-game *Syphon Filter 3* and the World War II- shooter *Medal of*

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Honor: Rising Sun, the authors not only discuss how the release of the former game, originally set for late September 2001, was postponed because of similarities between the plot and the terrorist attacks; they also present a close reading of the Pearl Harbor-segment of the *Medal of Honor*-game, which, as a first in the series, was set in the Pacific theatre of World War II. Here, the central premise of Ouellette and Thompson is that, since comparisons between 9/11 and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 were often made by the Bush administration and through public discourse in general, many of the actions performed by players in *Medal of Honor Rising Sun* can also be seen as symbolical references to 9/11, and how it brought 'war' to the American home front as well. Examples include a segment where the player, as a marine aboard a docked ship at Pearl Harbor, is given a fire extinguisher to put out a fire following a bomb explosion, which is interpreted as a reference to the actions of the first responders in New York during the 9/11 attacks; and a scene where the player witnesses a Japanese kamikaze attack when he reaches the deck of the ship, which is seen as a direct reference to the hijacked airlines crashing into the World Trade Center. These allegorical readings are, in itself, useful and intriguing, and could even be used as a starting point for research into player appropriations. At the same time, they certainly do not substantiate the *a priori* claim that this reading was the dominant one among American gamers (as the authors explicitly state in the conclusion of the introductory chapter), since they do not refer to any player interviews or other sources that could confirm such a statement. In the end, the authors need to render more explicit whether they are presenting a cultural reading of the game or want to say something about the impact of the game on American culture in general, which are two very different things.

In several of the subsequent chapters too, similar, somewhat overstretched and unfounded analyses can be found. In the first thematic chapter of the book, Ouellette and Thompson describe how 'the city', and New York in particular, as represented in post-9/11 video games, has become a metonymy for the US and the American consumerist lifestyle, which has come under siege, and must reiteratively be protected by players as 'citizen soldiers', or, more precisely, 'citizen consumers' (pp. 23-26; the theme is also further explored in the second thematic chapter on the 'marketplace'). As such, the authors also shed light on the role played by the 'tower' in these ludic digital urban landscapes, and claim that, for example, the 'tower defense game', which became a more popular genre since the release of games like *Plants vs. Zombies* and *Defense Grid: The Awakening* in 2009, can essentially be seen as an allegoric strife to continuously protect the Twin Towers against Al-Qaeda. Or as the authors state themselves:

"The player may easily confuse the save-the-world-against-aliens plot [of *Defense Grid: The Awakening*] for what it obscures: a collective

wish, since 9/11, to revisit the scene of New York and defend the towers. [...] One wonders what about *Defense Grid* might be capable of turning the grind of fighting multiple waves of nearly-unstoppable enemies into “a breath of fresh air” – we contend that the therapeutic mutualities of rebuilding and retaliation, far more than game design, better account for the success not only of *Defense Grid*, but also of the tower defense subgenre itself.” (p. 29).

This conclusion is obviously too far-reaching, as it not only ignores the fact that these games were released several years after 9/11; more importantly, it entirely rejects the appeal of the genre itself, even though a quick look on Metacritic would directly contradict that statement. It is exemplary of a broader issue with the book, as the authors tend to formulate their conclusions based on either broad assumptions or very specific characteristics. Specifically related to the second thematic chapter, this is also accompanied by incoherent methodological choices. In a rather exceptional remark on the corpus of games that was studied – references to method are predominantly missing throughout the book – the authors make the confusing choice to look at all the games which feature New York or fictionalized versions thereof released since 9/11, including race games like *Project Gotham Racing*, which clearly goes beyond the scope of the war-game. Such inconsistency is also visible elsewhere. In the fifth thematic chapter for example, which discusses how games can be seen as an analogy to how masculine identity is constructed, discussions of diverse games like *BioShock Infinite*, *Red Dead Redemption* and even *Rock Band* are also included, which is irrelevant given the focus of the presented study on the war-game.

In all, this does not mean that the book doesn't present interesting perspectives. The allegorical reading of the game *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, as described above, is a case in point, and the authors expand on it in subsequent chapters, by, for example, looking at how the game relates to changes in the US military's recruitment strategy, through a re-imagined notion of masculinity and brotherhood. Furthermore, in the sixth chapter, which is on the one hand rather flawed because the authors do not take into account how games like *Call of Duty* have positioned themselves within the industry throughout the years, they do present an interesting perspective on how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* presents a renewed relationship between masculinity, technology and the omni-presence of consumer capitalism. What all of these chapters, including the ones described earlier, have in common however, is not only a tendency to overstretch these analogies between modern games – rather inconsistently centered on the genre of the war-game – and post-9/11 American society, but also to present them through arguments that lack focus and are needlessly jargon-rich, which makes it very difficult for readers to grasp what the authors are actually trying to say. It ultimately results in an inconsistent and confusing read, which

scholars involved in the study of war-games might as well just want to skip. Stahl's (2010) discussion on how interactive 'militainment' is reshaping audiences into virtual citizen-soldiers, also particularly since the start of the 'War on Terror', and Crogan's (2011) study of how contemporary technoculture, and computer games as a dominant expression of it, can be seen as a shadow of military technoscientific developments, remain the superior analyses here.

References

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